

[Ain't It So, Corrie?]

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74 B SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: AIN'T IT SO, CORRIE?

Date of First Writing February 6, 1939

Name of Person Interviewed John William Prosser (white)

Fictitious Name Don Powers

Street Address 304 Wilson Street

Place Olympia Mill, Columbia, S.C.

Occupation Textile Worker

Name of Writer Mattie T. Jones

Name of Reviser State Office

"Yes, ma'am, this is Don Powers. Glad you come. Corrie's round here somewhere. Let's go in the house and set by the fire. It's pretty chilly out this mornin', though I'm warmed up all right with chopping this wood. Corrie says I never let a little work interfere with a chance to run my tongue. Yes, ma'am, them two boys in the truck belong to us. We've just got ten, and one dead. Me and Corrie has had it pretty tough, sometimes, but we're gettin' along fine now.

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"We'll go right through the kitchen, if you don' mind. This bedroom 2 is where Corrie stays most all the time. Corrie, this is the lady our preacher told us about. You help me to tell things straight, for I can't recollect things like I use to could, you know.

"Here's a letter what come in the mail this morning and it's shore a fine letter, too," Mr. Powers continued, as he reached for a letter on the mantelpiece. "Come from my nephew way out in Texas. This one never had no check in it; but he has sent me letters that had checks in 'em. About four months ago - it's been four, ain't it, Corrie? - Jim sent me money enough to pay my way out there, and I went and stayed two weeks with them. On account o' my health, you know. I was sick twelve months or more and didn't have no recovery much. My old teeth was just ruinin' me with poison, and me the only one to work. So he sent word for me to come out to Amarilla, Texas - that's where Jim lives - and he would have every last one of them pulled out and pay all the bills. I went, and he was as good as his word. And I'm a-gettin' better fast now. Can hit it ten hours a day, and I calls that pretty good for an old man like me.

"We ain't been in Columbia but ten years. Ain't it been ten, Corrie?"

"No, Don, it's been a little over twelve years. You can't remember nothin', Don. We come to Columbia in November, 1926."

"We was both raised in Florence County," Mr. Powers continued. "My father and mother lived around Pamplico and Lake City all their lives. My father was a blacksmith. He never owned a thing in his life but a trade. Now my mother did have seventy-nine acres of nothin' but woods, but she lost that in 1900. They give a mortgage on it and lost it, you know.

"She died January 31, 1904, with pneumonia. My father married again in six months, and my stepmother didn't get on well with we four boys. I 3 was the baby, and she liked me better then she did the other boys. They run away from home not long after she come

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there. When my father died, five years after that, I had to take his place the best I could and keep her up.

“None of us children got no education hardly. I reckon I went to school two years in all. I'd go a couple of weeks, and then I'd have to stop to help in the shop. You see, I learnt the blacksmith trades too. But I managed to get in the third grade.”

“And I never got out of the second grade myself,” Mrs. Powers added, as her husband replenished the fire. “I went to [Postons?] to school five or six years and knowed everything in them second grade books by the time I was thirteen. But we never had no money to buy them new third grade books with, and I never did get to go none in the third grade.”

“First time I ever seen her was at Kingsburg,” Mr. Powers rejoined. “She was ten years old, and I was sorter playing with her. I told her then I wanted her to come live with me soon as she got a little older. But her daddy sent me word he'd meet me at the crossroad some day if I didn't stop my foolishness; so I got scared to go back over there.”

“It was a good thing you got scared, too, Don, 'cause my daddy always done what he said he was gonna do. It was three years before we met again. He come over home one Sunday evenin', but I kept hid in the room from him. I didn't have no pretty clothes to put on, and I was 'shame to go out. That was in the fall. Christmas day come, and somebody had traded Pa a hen for a puppy. And we cooked the hen for dinner. My sister and me pulled the pully bone, and I got the lucky piece. I put it over the front door, and that night in come Don right in that door. Then he kept comin' every Sunday 4 till March, when we got married.”

“I was twenty-two and she was fifteen,” Mr. Powers said. “I got 'er young so I could raise 'er to my notion. And it wasn't so very hard to get 'er, neither. I just told 'er, 'I got a mule and a buggy, and I got a good place to carry you to. Won't be so much work for you to do,

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neither. My mother and my auntie are both paralyzed, but Ma can use one hand and one foot all right.”

“And I told 'im I'd try it for a while,” Mrs. Powers rejoined. “So the eighth of March, 1914, me and 'im got married at my house. Had a big supper, too. Wasn't nobody hardly invited, but the house was full, and the yard was full. Yes, ma'am, all stayed for supper, and all the men got drunk.”

“And I got drunk, too,” Mr. Powers interrupted. “Her brother give me the whiskey. Course I had took a drink before, but I never had dranked to a habit. And I ain't never been drunk since. I've took some drinks, though, lots o' times.

“That night Miss Collins and Miss [Turbeyville?] fixed up a room all nice for us. They told Corrie, 'Course he's got sense enough to stay out till you've got in the bed.' And I stayed out, too. Next mornin' we stayed in bed till the sun was way up and comin' in at the window. Corrie wasn't use to cookin' breakfast 'cept by lamplight, and she said it seemed so strange to her to be a-cookin' breakfast and the sun a-shinin' in at the window.

“We was gettin' along all right. I was workin' with a blacksmith and makin' three dollars a day. Well, sir, in August we was burnt out, our clothes and everything. Never saved a thing hardly. Caught from the 5 fire in the stove while we was cookin' dinner. We did get Ma an' Aunt Sallie out before the roof fell in. We never had nothin' left to move but two beds, a stove, and a few chairs. So we carried them over to a railroad shanty, and I done track work for two years, at a dollar and a quarter a day. Then we moved to a farm. And when the big [fresh?] come, in 1916, it washed all our crops away, and we had nothin' left again.

“We moved thirteen times in twelve months, goin' from one place to another. Our first baby was borned in 1917. That same year my mother and Aunt Sallie both died, and I'm telling you, we had a time.

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"The World War was goin' on then, and I was subpoenaed. I listened for the call every day, but it never come before the armistice was signed up and our boys begin to come back home. The next year - wasn't it the next year, Corrie? - we moved to the Brown place. Everything was bringin' a good price then, and we had a horse and buggy and a cow. That year I planted two and three-quarters acres of tobacco, and cleared \$1,100. I bought us another black-speckled cow and a horse, old Dan. Paid \$135 for the cow and \$200 for the horse. But I wanted to do bigger things, so I moved to another farm and lost about everything again. It was a wet year, and tobacco got all scalded out in the field. Couldn't sell it at no price. My \$1,100 was gone, and me with a wife, two children, and two of my wife's nephews to feed. We had took these two boys 'cause their mother died and they didn't have nowheres else to go.

"Then I figured we could do better at a cotton mill, so we moved to Darlington, South Carolina. I got a job that paid ten cents an hour, and the boys picked up a little work every now and again. But I guess I had the movin' habit by that time, and we moved from one place to another.

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We'd sharecrop for a while, and then we'd rent. I'd work at a sawmill, and then blacksmith again, till we settled down and come to Columbia. What year was that, Corrie?"

"I've just told you, Don, it was the last of November, 1926. And we've moved three times since we come here. And every time we've had three rooms to live in.

"Susie, the baby's waked up. Bring its bottle on soon as it's ready." As she took the baby from the cradle, improvised out of a dry goods box and some rough boards, she continued: "We have to buy Carnation milk for her. She's little, but she's been well all along. She didn't weigh but six pounds when she come. You see I wasn't well and had to go to the hospital this time. My health was poor, and I had such a bad time with George. I didn't have no 'tention like I ought to've had. That was a year and a half ago. So the doctor at the

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clinic said I'd better go to the hospital. I got along all right this time, but I've gotta go back in March."

"Doctor told her she mustn't have any more babies before she had this one," Mr. Powers said. "They told her to come to the hospital to that effect in March, but I ain't sure we'll get her to go. I'm leaven' it up to her. If she wants to go, she can. But as for me, I don't believe in no birth control and nothin' like that myself. The Bible don't teach it, and I'm one who believes in what the Bible teaches and nothin' else.

"Self-control in the Bible. Well, maybe it is there, but the Lord said for Adam to go and replenish the earth. That's what he said, replenish the earth. And he told Abraham he'd make his seed like the sands of the sea. And, to my way of thinkin' that ain't birth control. I'd like to go back to them good old days myself. I don't like these highfalutin' 7 notions they're puttin' in the heads of women these days. Course I'm leaven' it up to her. She can go have the operation any day she wants to, and I won't object."

"It's the expense of it that I'm thinkin' about," Mrs. Powers rejoined. "We owe for this other one and can't pay what we owe. They only charged \$13.60 for everything. And we pay two dollars a week on it. The doctor hasn't sent no bill yet. Goodness knows how much that will be."

"I don't see why you don't go myself," Susie replied. "Won't cost as much as having another baby will cost. You've got four babies now. And goodness knows I've washed clothes and nursed younguns till I'm about fed up on it. That's all I've done since I was big enough to hold one on my lap. I want to go back to school now so bad I can taste it, but there's no chance for it. I went pretty regular till I was in the sixth grade. Then I couldn't get clothes that were decent and that looked anything like the ones the other girls wore. And I wouldn't go looking so shabby."

"There ain't none o' our children gone out o' the sixth grade," the father commented. "We couldn't buy books and clothes for 'em, you know. There, Susan, get that child before he

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falls!" the father yelled [petulantly?]. "Change his clothes and go get his bottle of chocolate milk or something for him to eat. Shut his mouth somehow. I'm tired of hearin' him bawl. We lost one of our babies once, and we've tried to take better care of these last ones."

"I've tried and tried to get a job," Susie said, as she returned with the chocolate milk, "but I can't get none, it seems like. Every week I do [Bob?] Smith's laundry - he's a boy what boards in the other side of the house. He pays fifty cents for that, but it don't go far. There's a good 8 school I've heard about. Yes'm, believe it is called Opportunity School. And I've been wanting to go to it every since I heard about it, but I can't get enough money to do anything.

"Just costs \$20 for the month. I'm going to see Miss Gray tomorrow. Maybe she can tell an how I can make some money. I'll do anything to get to go to that school I've heard so much about. My oldest brother has a job learning to weave in the mill now, and he makes \$5.60 a week. Soon as he learns, he'll make \$12.00 But he fell out with Papa and left home, so I know he won't give me anything on it. He wanted to go to the shows and stay out nights like other boys do, and Papa wouldn't let him do it. He's staying with Mrs. Burgess, helping her and driving her car for her. She's a widow, you see, and needs somebody.

"Do I like to go to picture shows? I reckon I do, but Papa won't let me go, if he knows it. We have to slip and go. I got my picture took in that contest the State Theater put on once. And if I had been at the show when it come on the screen, I'd have got \$32. But I couldn't go, and so I missed gettin' the money."

"No, sir, I don't believe in picture shows. And I don't believe in havin' no pictures on the walls either, 'cept these pictures of Jesus and Bible pictures like you see here. I believe in holiness and true religiousness myself. It's true I don't belong to no church now, me nor my wife. But we use to belong to the Pentecostal Tabernacle. We believe in immerser baptism and trustin' God to a great extent. But I got disappointed in churches and quit 'em all. I held mission work papers, licenses, you understand, for eight years, but I quit it all six months

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ago. Sometimes I walked fifteen miles out to a church to preach to people and try to get 'em saved, and I never got a cent for it, neither. I organized three mission churches, 9 but they didn't follow it up. I even quit smokin' cigarettes once, and my wife quit dippin' snuff. But we've both gone back to it now."

"I'll just tell you the whole truth and be done with it," Mr. Powers continued, as he reached a cigarette from the mantelpiece and lighted it. "I was all down and out on account o' my health, and I lost my mind completely. Couldn't hold myself together. Had so much worry, I just couldn't stan' the pressure. So I started smokin' again to help me steady myself. I left home one day. Just walked out to leave it all and stay gone. You thought I was gone for good, too, didn't you, Corrie?"

"Naw, you had been doin' it so much I knowed you'd come on back."

"Well, I shore didn't mean to come back that time. I walked eight miles out in the country and stopped at a friend's house to spen' the night. I told him I'd never go back home again. But that night about 11 o'clock I got so sick I thought I was gonna die shore enough. I laid there and figured I had a bed back home and had it paid for. So I called John and said, 'John, get up. I'm gonna die, and I want to die in my own bed that I paid for. I want you to take me home.' And he did. But I didn't die. Soon as I got in my own bed, I felt better.

"I guess you noticed my truck in the back yard. Two years ago, I paid \$30 for a strip-down Chevrolet. Then I decided to put a body on it and try to sell some wood. I can buy wood for fifty cents a load. And when I cut it up, I get \$1.50 a load. I get two loads a week, and the \$3.00 helps out. I make \$16.50 a week in the mill at Granby, runnin' super draft slubbers.

"We've had a big trip to Georgetown in that truck," Mrs. Powers recalled, her blue eyes gleaming with pleasure as she related the story: "We covered the 10 truck with a canvas cloth, piled all the children in, and went to visit my thirteen sisters and brothers who live in the country around Georgetown. It's the only vacation trip we ever had. One of my sisters, Mary Lou, had a fish fry for us one evenin'. My brother-in-law took Don and the boys out in

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his boat, and they caught the fish out o' the river. They brought home three dishpanfuls. I never seen so many fish in all my life. But we eat 'em every one. Fried 'em right out in the woods, with all the pretty moss hangin' on the trees, and the boats a-comin' right up to the back of the houses. I was the prettiest sight I ever did see. We had such a good time we stayed two weeks. The mills was shut down, and Don could stay all right.

"The children all behaved better while we was gone. Even when we come back home. They aggravate me nearly to death sometimes. But I enjoy 'tending to 'em. We ain't got nary one to spare. I'm glad we're all livin' and satisfied. None of us ain't cried for hungry yet. We've been pretty low down, though."

"We ain't never been where we didn't have nothin' in the house to eat but one time." Her husband interrupted. "I paid my grocery bill one Saturday evenin' and sent a order for my week's supply. The clerk never sent us a thing. I was settin' in the swing on the front porch here, and a man was passin' on the sidewalk. He come in. And when he left, he laid a \$5-bill on my lap. God saw no way, so He made a way. The ravens fed old man 'Lijah, you know.

"Fruit? No, ma'am. It costs too much, and makes 'em eat up too much rations. I got every kind of fruit you can mention, Christmas, but I can't buy 'em any more. Fruit makes 'em eat to much."

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"Having fruit sure made me eat more and made me enjoy my vittles more, too," Susie put in. "I told Mama I felt better when I eat that fruit than I have all year. I wish we could have just one apple or one orange apiece every day."

"No'm, we tried a budget one time after I went to a meetin' at the community house," Mrs. Powers replied, "but we never tried to long. To just try to stretch our money as far as it'll go. And if it won't go, we just have to do without. I sent to the store for a 12-pound sack o' flour yesterday, and I told the storekeeper to send me a cheaper one if he had any.

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Twelve pounds don't go nowheres with all these hungry mouths to feed. But I rather live here where we get our money than to live in the country. We didn't have none atall when we farmed."

"They fuss at me all the time," Mr. Powers said, "but I saved \$50 before Christmas. Never bought a thing for myself, neither. I gave Corrie ten dollars and Susie five, and then I bought socks and shoes for all the younguns. I set 'em all up to new things. Yes, Ma'am, I shore set 'em up. When I come from Texas, I lost my suitcase with all my clothes in it. The company paid me \$25 for it, but I wouldner took \$25 for what I had in it.

"Roosevelt's tried to make things easier for folks, but he ain't helped [us none?], I don't reckon. Vote[?] No, ma'am, I don't never vote. I don't believe in 'sociation' with folks that hang around the polls. That kind of trash don't suit me. Don't let her go, neither."

"These flowers here in the yard are all mine." Mr. Powers said. "The turnip sallet belongs to Corrie. It's little, but she picked a mess yesterday. I got the rose bushes off the streets. Whenever I see a woman has throwed away cuttings, I go pick 'em up and stick 'em out here in our 12 yard. They always grow, too. Ain't it so Corrie? This one right here by the steps is the prettiest red one in the summertime. These pansy plants was give to me. Ain't they gonna be pretty when they start bloomin' along the walk?"